

The Mystery of The Yellow Room

By GASTON LEROUX

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CHAPTER XVI.

Strange Phenomenon of the Disassociation of Matter.

"I AM again at the window sill," continues Rouletabille, "and once more I raise my head above it. Through an opening in the curtains, the arrangement of which has not been changed, I am ready to look, anxious to note the position in which I am going to find the murderer, whether his back will still be turned toward me, whether he is still seated at the desk writing. But perhaps—perhaps—he is no longer there. Yet how could he have fled? Was I not in possession of his ladder? I force myself to be cool. I raise my head yet higher. I look—he is still there. I see his monstrous back, deformed by the shadow thrown by the candle. He is no longer writing now, and the candle is on the parquet, over which he is bending—a position which serves my purpose.

"I hold my breath. I mount the ladder. I am on the uppermost rung of it and with my left hand seize hold of the window sill. In this moment of approaching success I feel my heart beating wildly. I put my revolver between my teeth. A quick spring and I shall be on the window ledge. But the ladder! I had been obliged to press on it heavily, and my foot had scarcely left it when I felt it swaying beneath me. It grated on the wall and fell. But already my knees were touching the window sill, and by a movement quick as lightning I got on to it.

"But the murderer had been even quicker than I had been. He had heard the grating of the ladder on the wall, and I saw the monstrous back of the man raise itself. I saw his head. Did I really see it? The candle on the parquet lit up his legs only. Above the height of the table the chamber was in darkness. I saw a man with long hair, a full beard, wild looking eyes, a pale face framed in large whiskers as well as I could distinguish and as I think red in color. I did not know the face. That was, in brief, the chief sensation I received from that face in the dim half light in which I saw it. I did not know it, or at least I did not recognize it.

"Now for quick action. It was indeed time for that, for as I was about to place my legs through the window the man had seen me, had bounded to his feet, had sprung, as I foresaw he would, to the door of the antechamber, had time to open it and fled. But I was already behind him, revolver in hand, shouting, 'Help!'

"Like an arrow I crossed the room, but noticed a letter on the table as I rushed. I almost came up with the man in the antechamber, for he had lost time in opening the door to the gallery. I flew on wings and in the gallery was but a few feet behind him. He had taken, as I supposed he would, the gallery on his right—that is to say, the road he had prepared for his flight. 'Help, Jacques; help, Larsen!' I cried. He could not escape us. I raised a shout of joy, of savage victory. The man reached the intersection of the two galleries hardly two seconds before me for the meeting which I had prepared, the fatal shock which must inevitably take place at that spot. We all rushed to the crossing place—M. Stangerson and I coming from one end of the right gallery, Daddy Jacques coming from the other end of the gallery and Frederic Larsen coming from the 'off turning' gallery.

"The man was not there! We looked at each other stupidly and with eyes terrified. The man had vanished like a ghost. 'Where is he, where is he?' we all asked. 'It is impossible he can have escaped!' I cried, my terror mastered by my anger.

"I touched him!" exclaimed Frederic Larsen. 'I felt his breath on my face!' cried Daddy Jacques.

"Where is he, where is he?" we all cried.

"We raced like madmen along the two galleries. We visited doors and windows. They were closed—hermetically closed. They had not been opened. Besides, the opening of a door or window by this man whom we were hunting without our having perceived it would have been more inexplicable than his disappearance.

"Where is he, where is he? He could not have got away by a door or a window nor by any other way. He could not have passed through our bodies!

"I confess that for the moment I felt 'done for,' for the gallery was perfectly lighted, and there was neither trap nor secret door in the walls nor any sort of hiding place. We moved the chairs and lifted the pictures. Nothing, nothing! We would have looked into a flowerpot if there had been one to look into!"

When this mystery, thanks to Rouletabille, was naturally explained by the help alone of his masterful mind we were able to realize that the murderer had got away neither by a door, a window nor the stairs, a fact which the judges would not admit.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Inexplicable Gallery.

"M. LLE. STANGERSON appeared at the door of her antechamber," continues Rouletabille's notebook. "We were near her door in the gallery where this incredible phenomenon had taken place. There are moments when one feels as if one's brain were about to burst. A bullet in the head, a fracture of the skull, the seat of reason shattered—with only these can I compare the sensation which exhausted and left me void of sense.

"Happily Mlle. Stangerson appeared on the threshold of her antechamber. I saw her, and that helped to relieve my chaotic state of mind. I breathed her; I inhaled the perfume of the lady in black who had been kind to me in my childhood whom I should never see again. I would have given ten years of my life—half my life—to see once more the lady in black. Alas, I no more meet her but from time to time, and yet, and yet, how the memory of that perfume, felt by me alone, carries me back to the days of my childhood! It was this sharp reminder from my beloved perfume of the lady in black which made me go to her, dressed wholly in white and so pale, so pale and so beautiful, on the threshold of the inexplicable gallery. Her beautiful golden hair, gathered into a knot on the back of her neck, left visible the red scar on her temple which had so nearly been the cause of her death. When I first got on the right track of the mystery of this case I had imagined that on the night of the tragedy in the yellow room Mlle. Stangerson had worn her hair in bands. But, then, how could I have imagined otherwise when I had not been in the yellow room?

"But now, since the occurrence of the inexplicable gallery, I did not reason at all. I stood there, stupid, before the apparition—so pale and so beautiful—of Mlle. Stangerson. She was clad in a dressing gown of dreamy white. One might have taken her to be a ghost—a lovely phantom. Her father took her in his arms and kissed her passionately, as if he had recovered her after being long lost to him. I dared not question her. He drew her into the room, and we followed them—for we had to know! The door of the boudoir was open. The terrified faces of the two nurses craned toward us. Mlle. Stangerson inquired the meaning of all the disturbance. That she was not in her own room was quite easily explained—quite easily. She had a fancy not to sleep that night in her chamber, but in the boudoir with her nurses, locking the door on them. Since the night of the crime she had experienced feelings of terror, and fears came over her that are easily to be comprehended.

"But who could imagine that on that particular night when he was to come she would by a mere chance determine to shut herself in with her women? Who would think that she would act contrary to her father's wish to sleep in the drawing room? Who could believe that the letter which had so recently been on the table in her room would no longer be there? He who could understand all this would have to assume that Mlle. Stangerson knew that the murderer was coming—she could not prevent his coming again—unknown to her father, unknown to all but to M. Robert Darzac. For he must know it now. Perhaps he had known it before! Did he remember that phrase in the Elysee garden, 'Must I commit a crime, then, to win you? Against whom the crime if not against the obstacle, against the murderer?'

"Ah, I would kill him with my own hand!" And I replied, 'You have not answered my question! That was the very truth. In truth, in truth, M. Darzac knew the murderer so well that, while wishing to kill him himself, he was afraid I should find him. There could be but two reasons why he had assisted me in my investigation. First, because I have forced him to do it, and, second, because she would be better protected.

"I am in the chamber—her room. I look at her, also at the place where the letter had just now been. She has possessed herself of it; it was evidently intended for her—evidently. How she trembles! Trembles at the strange story her father is telling her, of the presence of the murderer in her chamber and of the pursuit. But it is plainly to be seen that she is not wholly satisfied by the assurance given her until she had been told that the murderer by some incomprehensible means had been able to elude us.

"Then followed a silence. What a silence! We are all there—looking at her—her father, Larsen, Daddy Jacques and I. What were we all thinking of in the silence? After the events of that night, of the mystery of the inexplicable gallery, of the prodigious fact of the presence of the murderer in her room, it seemed to me that all our thoughts might have been translated into the words which were addressed to her, 'You who know of this mystery, explain it to us and we shall be-

able to save you.' How I longed to save her—from herself and from the other! It brought the tears to my eyes.

"Who can tell that, should we learn the secret of her mystery, it would not precipitate a tragedy more terrible than that which had already been enacted here? Who can tell if it might not mean her death? Yet it had brought her close to death, and we still knew nothing, or, rather, there are some of us who know nothing. But I—if I knew who, I should know all. Who? Who? Not knowing who, I must remain silent out of pity for her. For there is no doubt that she knows how he escaped from the yellow room. When I know who I will speak to him—to him!

"She looked at us now, with a far-away look in her eyes, as if we were not in the chamber. M. Stangerson broke the silence. He declared that, henceforth, he would no more absent himself from his daughter's apartments. She tried to oppose him in vain. He adhered firmly to his purpose. He would install himself there this very night, he said. Solely concerned for the health of his daughter, he reproached her for having left her bed. Then he suddenly began talking to her as if she were a little child. He smiled at her and seemed not to know either what he said or what he did. The illustrious professor had lost his head. Mlle. Stangerson in a tone of tender distress said, 'Father, father! Daddy Jacques blows his nose, and Frederic Larsen himself is obliged to turn away to hide his emotion. For myself, I am able neither to think or feel. I felt a contempt for myself.

"It was the first time that Frederic Larsen, like myself, found himself face to face with Mlle. Stangerson since the attack in the yellow room. Like me, he had insisted on being allowed to question the unhappy lady, but he had not, any more than had I, been permitted. To him, as to me, the same answer had always been given: Mlle. Stangerson was too weak to receive us. The questionings of the examining magistrate had overfatigued her. It was evidently intended not to give us any assistance in our researches. I was not surprised, but Frederic Larsen had always resented this conduct. It is true that he and I had a totally different theory of the crime. I still catch myself repeating from the depths of my heart: 'Save her! Save her without his speaking!' Who is he—the murderer? Take him and shut his mouth. But M. Darzac made it clear that in order to shut his mouth he must be killed. Have I the right to kill Mlle. Stangerson's murderer? No, I had not. But let him only give me the chance! Let me find out whether he is really a creature of flesh and blood! Let me see his dead body, since it cannot be taken alive.

"If I could but make this woman, who does not even look at us, understand! She is absorbed by her fears and by her father's distress of mind. And I can do nothing to save her. Yes, I will go to work once more and accomplish wonders.

"I move toward her. I would speak to her. I would entreat her to have confidence in me. I would, in a word, make her understand—she alone—that I know how the murderer escaped from the yellow room, that I have guessed the motives for her secrecy, and that I pity her with all my heart. But by her gestures she begged us to leave her alone, expressing weariness and the need for immediate rest. M. Stangerson asked us to go back to our rooms and thanked us. Frederic Larsen and I bowed to him, and, followed by Daddy Jacques, we regained the gallery. I heard Larsen murmur, 'Strange! Strange! He made a sign to me to go with him into his room. On the threshold he turned toward Daddy Jacques.

"Did you see him distinctly? he asked. 'Who?'

"The man."

"Saw him? Why, he had a big red beard and red hair."

"That's how he appeared to me, I said.

"And to me," said Larsen. "The great Fred and I were alone in his chamber now to talk over this thing. We talked for an hour, turning the matter over and viewing it from every side. From the questions put by him, from the explanation which he gives me, it is clear to me that in spite of all our senses he is persuaded the man disappeared by some secret passage in the chateau known to him alone.

"He knows the chateau," he said to me; "he knows it well."

"He is a rather tall man, well built," I suggested.

"He is as tall as he wants to be," murmured Fred.

"I understand," I said. "But how do you account for his red hair and beard?"

"Too much beard, too much hair—false," says Fred.

"That's easily said. You are always thinking of Robert Darzac. You can't get rid of that idea! I am certain that he is innocent."

"So much the better. I hope so, but everything condemns him. Did

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you notice the marks on the carpet? Come and look at them.' 'I have seen them. They are the marks of the neat boots the same as those we saw on the border of the lake.' 'Can you deny that they belong to Robert Darzac?' 'Of course one may be mistaken.' 'Have you noticed that those footprints only go in one direction, that there are no return marks? When the man came from the chamber, pursued by all of us, his footprints left no traces behind them.' 'He had perhaps been in the chamber for hours. The mud from his boots had dried, and he moved with such rapidity on the points of his toes. We saw him running, but we did not hear his steps.'

"I suddenly put an end to this idle chatter, void of any logic, and made a sign to Larsen to listen. 'There, below, some one is shutting a door.' 'I rise. Larsen follows me. We descend to the ground floor of the chateau. I lead him to the little semi-circular room under the terrace beneath the window of the 'off turning' gallery. I point to the door, now closed, open a short time before, under which a shaft of light is visible. 'The forest keeper!' says Fred. 'Come on!' I whisper.

"Prepared, I know not why, to believe that the keeper is the guilty man I go to the door and rap smartly on it. 'Some might think that we were rather late in thinking of the keeper, since our first business, after having found that the murderer had escaped us in the gallery, ought to have been to search everywhere else—around the chateau, in the park—'

"Had this criticism been made at the time we could only have answered that the assassin had disappeared from the gallery in such a way that we thought he was no longer anywhere! He had eluded us when we all had our hands stretched out ready to seize him—when we were almost touching him. We had no longer any ground for hoping that we could clear up the mystery of that night.

"As soon as I rapped at the door it was opened, and the keeper asked us quietly what we wanted. He was undressed and preparing to go to bed. The bed had not yet been disturbed. 'We entered and I affected surprise. 'Not gone to bed yet?'

"No," he replied roughly. 'I have been making a round of the park and in the woods. I am only just back—and sleepy. Good night!'

"Listen," I said. 'An hour ago there was a ladder close by your window.'

"What ladder? I did not see any ladder. Good night!'

"And he simply put us out of the room. When we were outside I looked at Larsen. His face was impenetrable."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Rouletabille Has Drawn a Circle Between the Two Bumps on His Forehead.

"WE separated on the thresholds of our rooms with a melancholy shake of the hands. Larsen's was an original brain, very intelligent, but without method. I did not go to bed. I awaited the coming of daylight and then went down to the front of the chateau and made a detour, examining every trace of footprints coming toward it or going from it. These, however, were so mixed and confusing that I could make nothing of them. Here I may make a remark—I am not accustomed to attach an exaggerated importance to exterior signs left in the track of a crime.

"The method which traces the criminal by means of the tracks of his footsteps is altogether primitive. So many footprints are identical. However, in the disturbed state of my mind I did go into the deserted court and did look at all the footprints I could find there, seeking for some indication as a basis for reasoning.

"If I could but find a right starting point! In despair I seated myself on a stone. For over an hour I busied my-

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self with the common, ordinary of a policeman. Like the least intelligent of detectives I went on blind, over the traces of footprints which told me just no more than they could.

"I came to the conclusion that I was a fool, lower in the scale of intelligence than even the police of the modern romance. Novelists build mountains of stupidity out of a footprint on the sand or from an impression of a hand on the wall. That's the way innocent men are brought to prison. It might convince an examining magistrate or the head of a detective department, but it's not proof. You writers forget that what the senses furnish is not proof. If I am taking cognizance of what is offered me by my senses I do so but to bring the results within the circle of my reason. That circle may be the most circumscribed, but, if it is, it has this advantage—it holds nothing but the truth! Yes, I swear that I have never used the evidence of the senses but as servants to my reason. I have never permitted them to become my master. They have not made of me that monstrous thing—worse than a blind man—a man who sees falsely. And that is why I can triumph over your error and your merely animal intelligence, Frederic Larsen.

"Be of good courage, then, Friend Rouletabille. It is impossible that the incident of the inexplicable gallery should be outside the circle of your reason. You know that! Then have faith and take thought with yourself and forget not that you took hold of the right end when you drew that circle in your brain within which to unravel this mysterious play of circumstance.

"To it, once again! Go back to the gallery. Take your stand on your reason and rest there as Frederic Larsen rests on his cane. You will then soon prove that the great Fred is nothing but a fool.—30th October. Noon. "JOSEPH ROULETABILLE."

"I acted as I planned. With head on fire, I retraced my way to the gallery, and without having found anything more than I had seen on the previous night, the right hold I had taken of my reason drew me to something so important that I was obliged to cling to it to save myself from falling.

"Now for the strength and patience to find sensible traces to fit in with my thinking—and these must come within the circle I have drawn between the two bumps on my forehead.—30th October. Midnight. "JOSEPH ROULETABILLE."

(Continued next week.)

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